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Voters to decide fate of ambulance transport fees Nov. 2

"In my profession, as a career lieutenant with the fire rescue service in a neighboring jurisdiction, where charging for (ambulance) transports has been in place for years now, I can personally attest to the implications of such a program. The fact that I am regularly met on emergency calls with reluctance, if not sheer refusal, to be taken for much-needed care cannot be discounted." — June 2010, James P. Seavey, Sr., chief of the Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department and the nation's 2009 volunteer fire chief of the year.

Despite accounts by Seavey and other first responders about the dangers of ambulance fees, advocates of the fees continue to blithely assert that there is no evidence of harm. However, studies in medical journals, including in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, have documented that the high cost of emergency care, which includes ambulance fees of hundreds of dollars, cause some people experiencing heart attacks to delay getting critically important emergency treatment.

Unless voters repeal the ambulance fee law by voting against Question A on Nov. 2, thousands of people in Montgomery County who need an ambulance will be charged \$300 to \$800 by the county. These people include uninsured co-workers who commute here and are stricken at their Montgomery workplace, and visiting relatives and friends who suffer a heart attack or stroke. Some of these people will drive themselves to an emergency room to avoid the fee, putting themselves as well as drivers and pedestrians they encounter en route in harm's way. Advocates of ambulance fees claim that residents won't pay a cent. However, insurance companies aren't charities, and will raise rates to protect their bottom line when the county bills for ambulance transport.

Ambulance fee proponents point to Fairfax County as a model. Yet, in the year that Fairfax implemented ambulance fees (fiscal 2005), the rate of emergency medical calls declined by nearly 10 percent and stayed at that lower rate for two more years, declining again in fiscal 2008 by almost 10 percent as many people lost their jobs and health insurance due to the recession.

County Executive Isiah Leggett, who intervened in court to try to prevent voters from even having the opportunity to vote on the ambulance fee law, has authorized on-duty career firefighters to leaflet Metro stations, shopping centers and high school football games to influence the vote on ambulance fees. Leggett is using our tax dollars to lobby us.

Projected ambulance fee revenue equals only one three-hundredth of county-funded budgets. Although Leggett found \$4 million for Costco and \$2.5 million for cost overruns for the Live Nation entertainment project, he has irresponsibly proposed laying off dozens of fire and rescue personnel to save \$4.5 million if voters repeal ambulance fees.

Voters shouldn't be intimidated by the county executive's scare campaign. He knows the County Council has final say on the budget and won't lay off dozens of firefighters. As it did last year, the council would cut non-essential spending.

In difficult economic times, responsible fiscal management requires making tough choices. Protecting public safety is the first responsibility of government, and the county shouldn't resort to chasing ambulances for revenue. Vote against question A.

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The writer is a member of Montgomery County Council (District 3) and Chair of the Council's Public Safety Committee.